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## GERRIT SMITH'S EFFORT IN BEHALF OF THE NEGROES IN NEW YORK

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the condition of the free Negroes in the Southern States became more and more critical. The doctrine of the rights of man, which had swept over the world in the latter part of the eighteenth century had had its effect on the colonists and resulted in the manumission of many slaves. These freedmen taking advantage of their economic and educational opportunities became an ever increasing menace to the social institutions that had no foundation except that of slavery. Ambitious, often aggressive, they were a constant source of dissatisfaction because of the unhappy comparison of their lot with that of the slaves. They, moreover, encouraged the slaves to improve their condition and to escape to the North. This situation was rendered still more critical for the reason that the South, considering slavery indispensable to its economic life, was already being lashed into a frenzy to gain new slave territory and to strengthen the institution by every possible method of oppression of the blacks. Measures inimical to the economic progress of freedmen were enacted.<sup>1</sup> Many who had been manumitted were seized and again reduced to slavery. Educational opportunities were restricted or denied. Legally they were without voice and hence could secure no redress when wronged.<sup>2</sup>

This economic poverty, insecurity of personal liberty, and absolutely negative political status, impelled the freedmen to find better conditions in the North. The reaction against plantation life and the glittering attractions of the

<sup>1</sup> See the session laws of the State Legislatures, and Woodson's *Education of the Negro Prior to 1861*, pp. 151-178.

<sup>2</sup> Goodell, *Slave Code*, and Hurd, *The Law of Freedom and Bondage*, II, pp. 1-218.

large city with the prospect of earning money less arduously no doubt account for their influx into the industrial centers.<sup>3</sup> These free blacks migrated in great numbers especially to New York and Philadelphia. The Colonization Society attempted to solve the problem by effecting the colonization of the free Negroes somewhere either within or without the United States. Many friends of the Negroes and even some of the Negroes themselves thought favorably of the idea and a few small colonies were formed in the Western States and in Liberia.<sup>4</sup>

Among the anti-slavery men who at first saw no fault in the aims of the Colonization Society was Gerrit Smith. The son of a slave owner in the State of New York, he was acquainted with slavery in the milder form in which it existed in the North. It was just two years before his birth that the legislature of New York passed its act of emancipation providing that all children after the year 1799 should be free, the males on reaching the age of twenty-eight years and the female twenty-five. His father, Peter Smith, was a slaveholder and the owner of extensive lands in the counties of northern New York; and even before his death the management of these vast properties devolved upon his son.

He soon became deeply interested in the uplift of the slaves and endeavored to improve their condition by gradual emancipation looking forward to colonization. As early as 1834, his diary shows a growing belief in the universal right to liberty. Years ripened this belief and also developed his anti-land-monopolist principles, both of which reached fruition in his act of 1846, by which he gave away thousands of acres of land. He severed his connection with the Colonization Society when that body overtly declared that it was not a society for the abolition of slavery nor for the improvement of the blacks nor for the suppression of the slave trade, and he threw his energy into the work of abolition as fervently, if not as drastically, as Garrison.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Woodson, *A Century of Negro Migration*, Chapter II.

<sup>4</sup> The JOURNAL OF NEGRO HISTORY, I, p. 276; II, p. 209.

<sup>5</sup> Frothingham, *Gerrit Smith*, pp. 94-143.

Anti-land-monopolist as he was, Gerrit Smith believed that the life of the small free farmer was calculated to develop thrift and self respect in the character of the colored freedmen that he saw crowded in sections of the large cities. For although enjoying greater security of personal liberty, the mass of colored people in New York State had not made much economic progress, even to the extent of possessing property valued at two hundred and fifty dollars, which in that State would have entitled them to the right to vote.<sup>6</sup> He said that he had for years indulged the thought that when he had sold enough land to pay his debts, he would give away the remainder to the poor. He was an Agrarian, who wanted every man desirous to own a farm to have one. He, therefore, felt that it was safe to make a beginning in the work of distributing land to individuals. He had theretofore given tracts of land to public institutions and a few small parcels to individuals, but had not entered upon the larger task of making large donations of land to the poor.

He then planned to transfer three thousand parcels of land of forty to sixty acres each during the following three years. To whom among the poor he should make these deeds, was a question he could not hastily solve. He was sure, however, that, inasmuch as his home and the land were both in the State of New York, it would be very suitable to select his beneficiaries from among the people of that State. But for a long time, he was at a loss to decide, whether to take his beneficiaries generally from the meritorious poor or only from the deserving Negroes. He said, "I could not put a bounty on color. I shrank from the least appearance of doing so, and if I know my heart, it was equally compassionate toward such white and black men as are equal sufferers."<sup>7</sup> In the end, however, he concluded to confine his gifts to Negroes.

He would not have come to this conclusion he said, if the land he had to give away had been several times as much

<sup>6</sup> Hurd, *Law of Freedom and Bondage*, II, p. 56.

<sup>7</sup> Frothingham, *Gerrit Smith*, p. 103.

as it was, nor if the Negroes, the poorest of the poor, had not been the most deeply wronged class of the citizens. "That they are so," said he, "is evident, if only from the fact, that the cruel, killing, Heaven-defying prejudice of which they are victims, has closed against them the avenues to riches and respectability—to happiness and usefulness. That they are so, is also evident from the fact, that, whilst white men in this State, however destitute of property, are allowed to vote for Civil Rulers, every colored man in it who does not own landed estate to the value of two-hundred and fifty dollars, is excluded from the exercise of this natural and indispensably protective right."<sup>8</sup> He confessed that he was influenced by the consideration that there was great encouragement to improve the condition of the Negroes, because every amelioration in it contributed to loosen the bands of the enslaved portion of their outraged and afflicted race.

He, therefore, requested Reverend Theodore S. Wright, Reverend Charles B. Ray, and Dr. J. McCune Smith, three representative Negroes of New York City, to make out a list of the Negroes who should receive from him parcels of land. His only restrictions upon them in making this selection were that they should choose no person younger than twenty-one and no person older than sixty; that they accept no person who was in easy circumstances as to property; and no one who was already the owner of land, and no drunkards.<sup>9</sup> He further promised to pay all taxes as well as purchase money and interest due to the State of New York hoping that none of the parcels would be sold for the non-payment of taxes.<sup>10</sup> The total number of colonists were to be one thousand nine hundred and eighty-five, to be distributed as follows: in the county of Suffolk, 127; Queens, 215; Kings, 197; New York, 861; Richmond, 832; Rockland, 331; Westchester, 115; Dutchess, 150; Sullivan, 5; Ulster,

<sup>8</sup> Frothingham, *Gerrit Smith*, 104.

<sup>9</sup> *Letter of Gerrit Smith to Theodore S. Wright, Charles B. Ray, and J. McCune Smith.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

106; Orange, 136; and Putnam, 10. Although this distribution was suggested the actual grants seem to have been made in the counties of Franklin, Essex, Hamilton, Fulton, Oneida, Delaware, Madison and Ulster.

On September 9, 1846, he wrote again to three gentlemen of color, saying that a thousand of the deeds were already in the hands of the committee for distribution. He had saved them the expense of securing the certificate of the County Clerk by having the acknowledgment of the execution taken by a Supreme Court judge. The only expense left for the beneficiaries to bear was the recording of the deed. The letter closed with a request that the three gentlemen prepare and send out a circular among the persons receiving the deeds, making known to them the conditions and reasons which actuated him in bestowing the land. This was done and the recipients were exhorted to profit by the chance to become land owners and thereby secure their right to vote.

These lands, as Smith realized and admitted, were not all arable but many of them had considerable timber. Such property today would be considered valuable, but in those days of plentitude it passed as undesirable. Some of his enemies accused him of making for himself a reputation for generosity by giving away useless land. There is no evidence, however, that such accusations were made by the Negroes.<sup>11</sup> But be that as it may, the experiment was a failure. It was not successful because of the intractability of the land, the harshness of the climate, and in a great measure, the inefficiency of the settlers. They had none of the qualities of farmers. Furthermore, having been disabled by infirmities and vices they could not as beneficiaries answer the call of the benefactor. Peterboro, the town opened to Negroes in this section did maintain a school and served as a station of the underground railroad but the agricultural results expected of the enterprise never materialized.<sup>12</sup> The main

<sup>11</sup> *Special Report of the U. S. Commissioner of Education on the Schools of the District of Columbia*, 1871, p. 367; *The African Repository*, X, p. 312.

<sup>12</sup> Frothingham, *Gerrit Smith*, p. 73.

trouble in this case was the impossibility of substituting something foreign for individual enterprise.

The failure of the enterprise did not cause this philanthropist to cease his activities in behalf of freedom and justice to the Negroes. He continued a staunch abolitionist, demanding unconditional emancipation of the slaves and leaving undone nothing which might effect this change. He was once intimately associated with John Brown, who at one time left his home and purchased from Smith a farm in the Negro colony in order to live with the blacks and help them to improve their economic condition. Smith lived until 1874, long enough to see the Negroes freed and many of them making elsewhere that economic progress which was the dream of his earlier years.

ZITA DYSON